

SECTION 2: USING EVIDENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION



By the end of this section you will be able to outline the ways evidence can be used within an institution.



To extend your learning, begin to explore these functions within your own institution.



To apply your learning, review the case study to help you consider a 'real life' example associated to the content of this section.

Why use evidence?

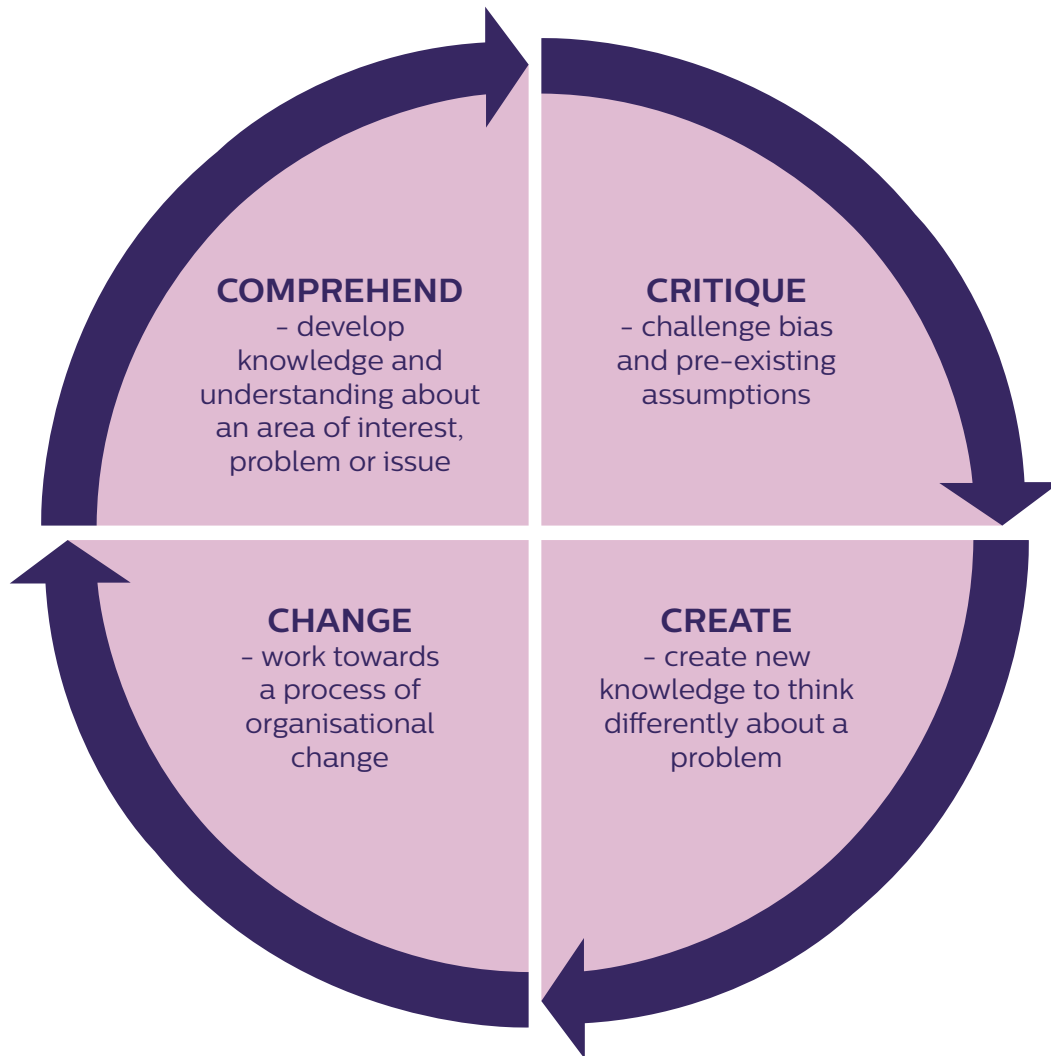
We use evidence every day to inform our thinking and to help us make decisions - consider the [data](#) gathered from customer photographs from restaurant visits, film critic's reviews and social media hashtags bringing together the views of so many on the latest television series.



We analyse these data sources and make judgements about those we value and those we might discount. We consider the views of others (the film is rated 5 stars, but your friend doesn't really like horror movies), and any limitations in the context/environment (the film is rated 5 stars, but it's only showing in a cinema 20 miles away). By doing this, we construct our [evidence base](#), form an opinion, and are able to make [evidence-informed](#) decisions.



Within a complex organisation, like a university, there will be many reasons why it is important to use evidence. Indeed, in many circumstances, you be expected to engage with data and evidence. You could be engaging with data and evidence to:



**Evidence
Essentials
Two**

It is important not to assume that evidence gathered in one context using a specific methodology, will apply directly to another. Try to move from evidenced-based decisions to evidence-informed decisions to account for your own environment and limits of proportionality (Parsons, 2017). Proportionality realistically balances best practice against any limitations in time, resource and scalability.

When can evidence help you?

Here are a few examples of the ways evidence is used by students and students' association/union staff within higher education (adapted from NESTA, ND, 13).

Can you add in examples from your own institution? The first row has been completed as an illustration.

Use of evidence by students	Your example
To provide a rationale for an institutional research and evaluation project	Evidence: student response rate to SCEFs is often very low Project: Student Course Evaluation Form (SCEF): What Do Staff and Students Really Think About SCEF? Sandra Airio (Student Intern, University of Aberdeen); focus groups with students
To contribute an opinion within formal or ad hoc academic committees and/or student voice mechanisms	
To develop, maintain or review students' association representative structures and services	
To ensure that student voices are heard within internal and external quality assurance and enhancement processes	
To create effective campaigns and communications for the benefit of an identified student group	
To commission or decommission an intervention or service based on student need and/or value for money	
To develop a team or working group with a specific skill set to address an identified problem	
To design more effective programmes of activity to ensure success	



Case Study: Using Evidence in Higher Education

To apply your learning, review the case study below and answer the questions to help you consider a 'real life' example associated to the content of this section.

Mel, Student Welfare Officer at Algorithm University

Mel is a local Students' Association Officer leading a campaign about the creation of positive student mental health at Algorithm University.

Algorithm prides itself on having a sophisticated learner analytics programme which measures, collects, analyses and reports data about students and their contexts, for the purposes of understanding and optimising learning at Algorithm.

In a meeting with the University's Head of Student Wellbeing, Mel outlines some ideas concerning how a campaign could be developed and constructed in partnership with the University to: raise awareness of indicators of positive mental health, how to notice if personal mental wellbeing is being compromised, and how to find and access local support to enhance personal mental wellbeing.

In further discussion, the Head of Student Wellbeing surprises Mel by indicating that the learner analytics programme will automatically offer a comprehensive process of early alerting of students' needs with appropriate stakeholders. They suggest that any campaign should be constructed around this provision, into which considerable investment has been made, and urges Mel and the Students' Association to enthusiastically embrace supporting the learner analytics programme.

Mel feels slightly coerced by this interaction and rather sheepishly agrees to use the learner analytics programme as the central strand of the campaign. The Head of Student Welfare is delighted and asks Mel to be on the Learner Analytics Steering Group. They also state that it is really important that we don't duplicate effort unnecessarily by bamboozling our students with too many sources of information about particular wellbeing topics.

Mel leaves the meeting with a slightly uneasy feeling and some disappointment about the outcome but finds it very hard to rationalise why these feelings prevail.





Case Study Critique: Using Evidence in Higher Education

Consider the following questions and then see if you can reconstruct this case to have some improved outcomes for Mel. There is an alternative, refashioned version in Appendix A which provides one approach to providing an evidence-informed enhancement of this situation. Before accessing this alternative, see if you can do any better.

- What are your immediate thoughts about the case study? Why does Mel feel uncomfortable?
- How much knowledge do Mel and the Head of Student Wellbeing appear to have about each other's contexts in this interaction?
- What assumptions have you made about the meeting? In the meeting, what assumptions did Mel and the Head of Student Wellbeing display?
- What evidence was used by both parties to evaluate the scope of the campaign? Were any evidence sources used judiciously to aid understanding?
- How can Mel learn from the experience in order to examine ways of ensuring that ideas are translated into effective action?

Notes



References and further Reading

JISC (2018) Code of Practice for Learning Analytics
www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/code-of-practice-for-learning-analytics

NESTA (ND) Using Research Evidence: A Practice Guide, National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts
www.nesta.org.uk/toolkit/using-research-evidence-practice-guide

Office for Students (OfS) (2018) Mental health and wellbeing: a priority
www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/our-news-and-blog/mental-health-and-wellbeing-a-priority

Parsons, D (2017) Demystifying Evaluation, Bristol: Policy Press.
QAA Scotland (2018/9) Optimising Existing Evidence: Webinar Series, QAA Scotland Enhancement Themes
www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/en/current-enhancement-theme/optimising-existing-evidence/webinar-series

Sobe, N W (2018) Problematizing Comparison in a Post-Exploration Age: Big Data, Educational Knowledge, and the Art of Criss-Crossing
Comparative Education Review, 62 (3): pp325-343.

Student Minds UK (2019) The University Mental Health Charter
www.studentminds.org.uk/charter.html

Universities UK (UUK) (2015) Student mental wellbeing in higher education: Good practice guide
www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2015/student-mental-wellbeing-in-he.pdf

Digital glossary for this section

[Data](#)

[Evidence Base](#)